



***Recent Paintings by Leon Berkowitz***

**1969 • THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART • WASHINGTON, D. C.**



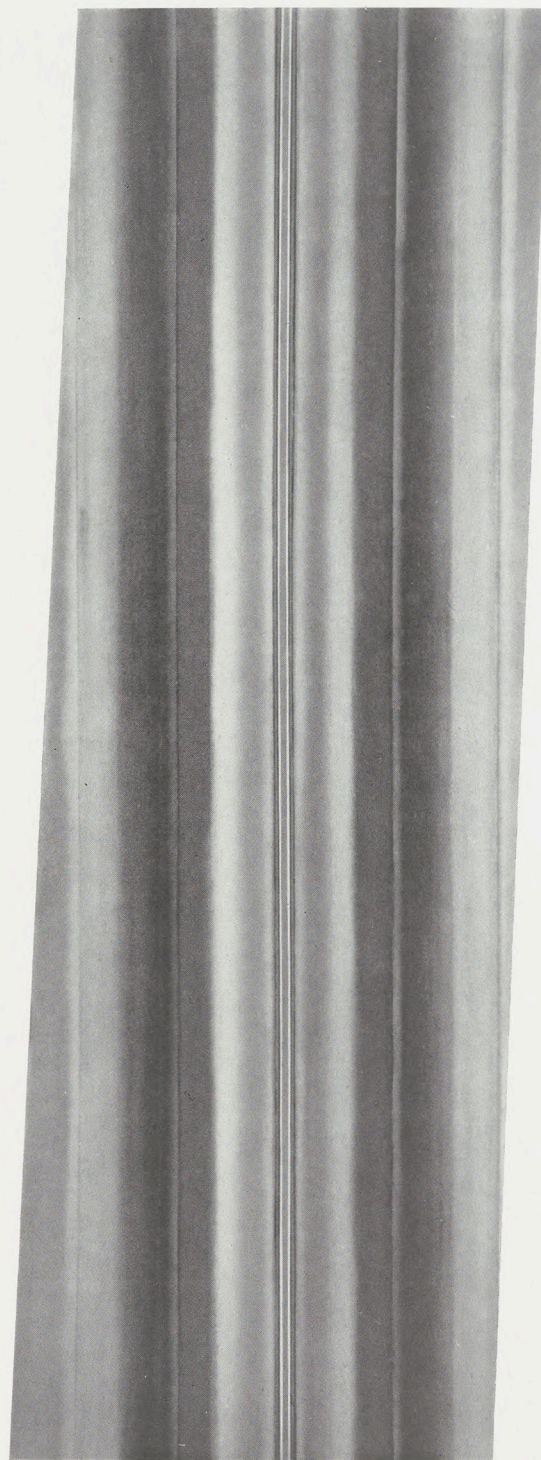
## FOREWORD

This exhibition of the paintings of Leon Berkowitz is one of a continuing series of exhibitions of the work of artists living in Washington. It honors an artist who has been a major influence on the development of art in the city. Berkowitz can be singled out, not only by virtue of his increasingly inspired painting and his long dedication to teaching, but also through his organization of the Washington Workshop which brought together Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Thomas Downing, Howard Mehring and Gene Davis in the 1950's.

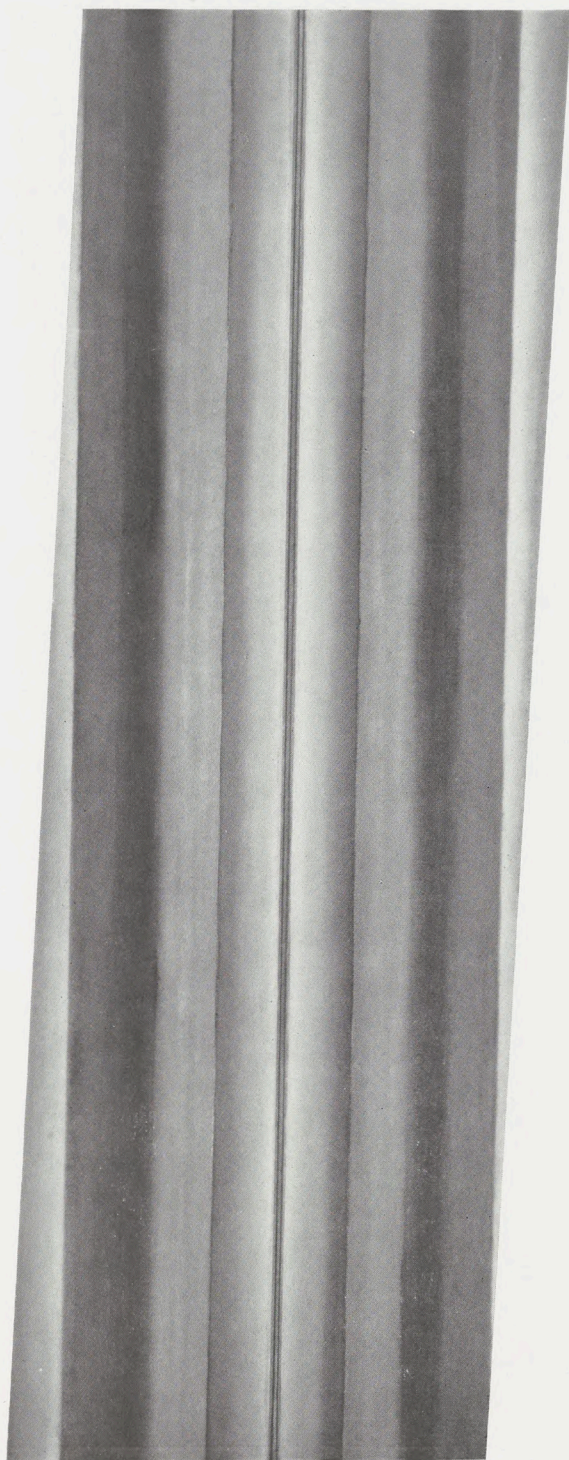
The exhibit reflects deep interest on our part in Berkowitz's most recent paintings which deal with color and light in a singularly individual and inspired way.

James Pilgrim, Curator, has been responsible for the organization of this important exhibition and for the introduction which follows.

JAMES HARITHAS  
*Director of the Gallery*







26. OBLIQUE NO. 9, 1969

## THE ART OF LEON BERKOWITZ

A concern with light as the primary element has been evident in the painting of Leon Berkowitz since the early fifties. The paintings in this exhibition, selected from his work of the past two years, represent a culmination of this concern and reflect his breakthrough in expressing light and color that began with the *Chasuble* series in 1965. The presence of columns of color will inevitably suggest a relationship to the work of members of the Washington Color School. Thus it is important to differentiate between Berkowitz's method, treatment of light and color, and content and that of such Washington painters as Noland, Downing, Davis, Mehring and Reed.

The Washington color painters are linked by their use of acrylic resin paints to stain color into the fiber of the canvas, making the canvas itself operate as a color area and producing a rich, sensuous, and velvety surface.\* A color area expands or con-

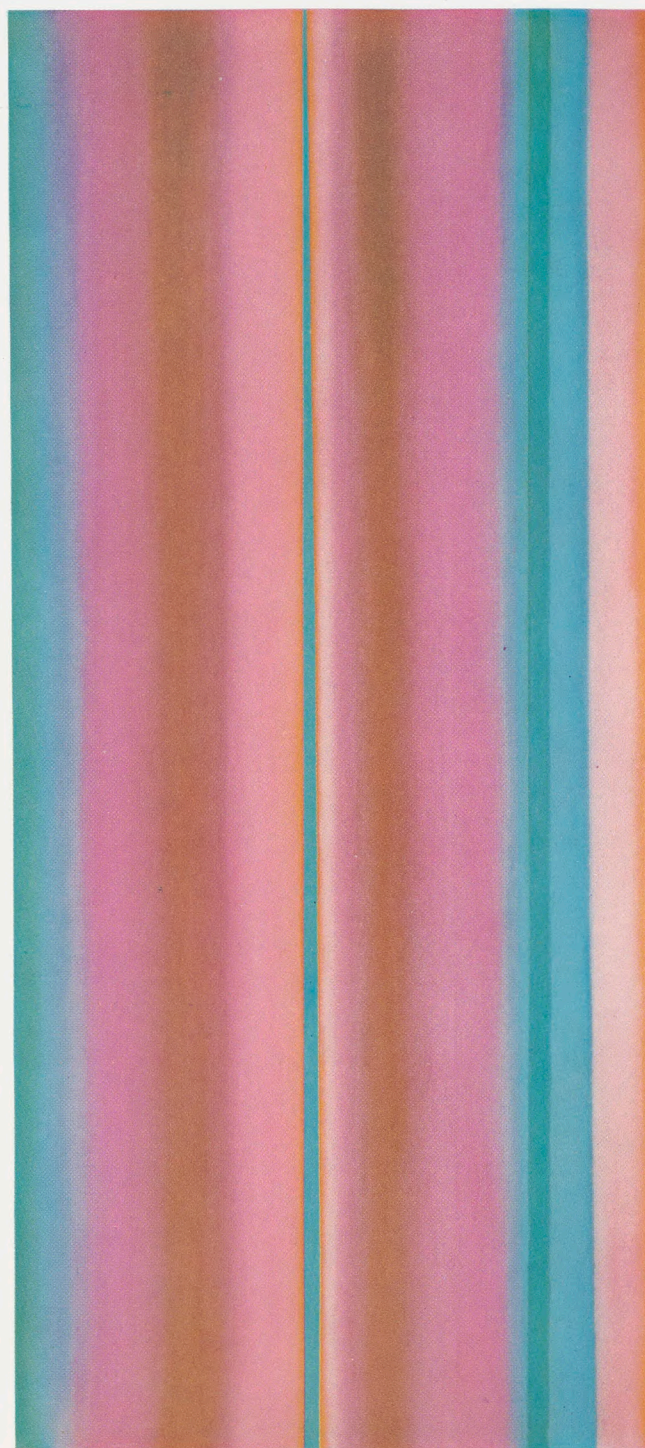
\* See Gerald Nordland, *The Washington Color Painters*, Washington Gallery of Modern Art. 1965.



15. CORONA NO. 7, 1968

tracts in relation to other color areas and to the raw canvas, yet it remains essentially flat and unmodulated, with light inactive within it. The exception is the work of Morris Louis. Berkowitz, through a unique application of oil paint, achieves a similarly rich and sensuous surface yet retains the greater potential for control, modulation, and luminosity inherent in the oil process. He prepares the canvas with a primer coat, allowing the grain of the canvas to remain, and then floats on planes of transparent color. Light is reflected from the white ground through the transparent pigments creating a brilliant and luminous effect and making the color appear to float between the canvas and the viewer. It is this concern with light as a part of the painting, the recreation of the condition of light on the canvas, that is at the core of Berkowitz's recent paintings.

In his *Cathedral* series Berkowitz established a pictorial format through which he could use light to create form. The narrow white triangle that splits the canvas acts, symbolically, as a light source. Light seems to move laterally from this core, creating changes in color intensity (the changes actually result from light reflecting through varying densities of pigment). Light also seems to move horizontally through subtle color changes from cold to warm to cold. The changes in color and





intensity produce an undulating spatial effect, a feeling of advance and recession from the picture plane. These horizontal movements are balanced by the tendency of light to shoot upward through shimmering columns of color. Thus a formal tension is established between the horizontal and the vertical.

The format of each subsequent series—the series have developed concurrently over the past year with innovations in one reflected in the others—is similar to the *Cathedrals* although there is a shift toward vertical shape that reaches a ratio of nearly 6:1 in the *Verticals*. The tension between horizontal and vertical is sustained throughout by Berkowitz's ability to accelerate the horizontal movement through an increasing use of flashing after-images, particularly in the *Coronas*. There is also a shift away from a symbolic light structure, represented by the white core, toward a structure more completely ordered by the action of light within the painting. His two most recent paintings (*Corona No. 12* and *Vertical No. 8*) come closest to the expression of form as light and color as light.

Berkowitz's use of light to create movement and counter-movement, to modulate color, to weave color back and forth—all indicative of his com-

plete control of the paint—is essentially an organic process, and in this sense his form is organic. By making shapes, either of color or raw canvas, interact with one another the Washington color painters have used color to create geometric form. Again, Morris Louis' work is the exception. They are primarily concerned with the "formal" problems posed by the painting: its structure, its relationship to the framing edge. Like much of the advanced painting of the 1960's their paintings assert their "realness" as objects in their own right, with no intent to represent or relate to nature or metaphysics, and finally with little intent to appeal to the senses or emotion. While Berkowitz's paintings also assert their "realness," their intent is to participate in the rhythms of life and nature, to be experienced through the senses and felt through emotion. They reflect an idealism that sees unity rather than discontinuity, and consequently the act of viewing the painting is seen as part of the same process. Thus, by focusing on the conditions of light, these remarkably beautiful paintings offer both an alternative to the concern with color in the context of geometric form and with formalist problems characteristic of Washington Color Painting and a bridge back to a more humanist tradition.

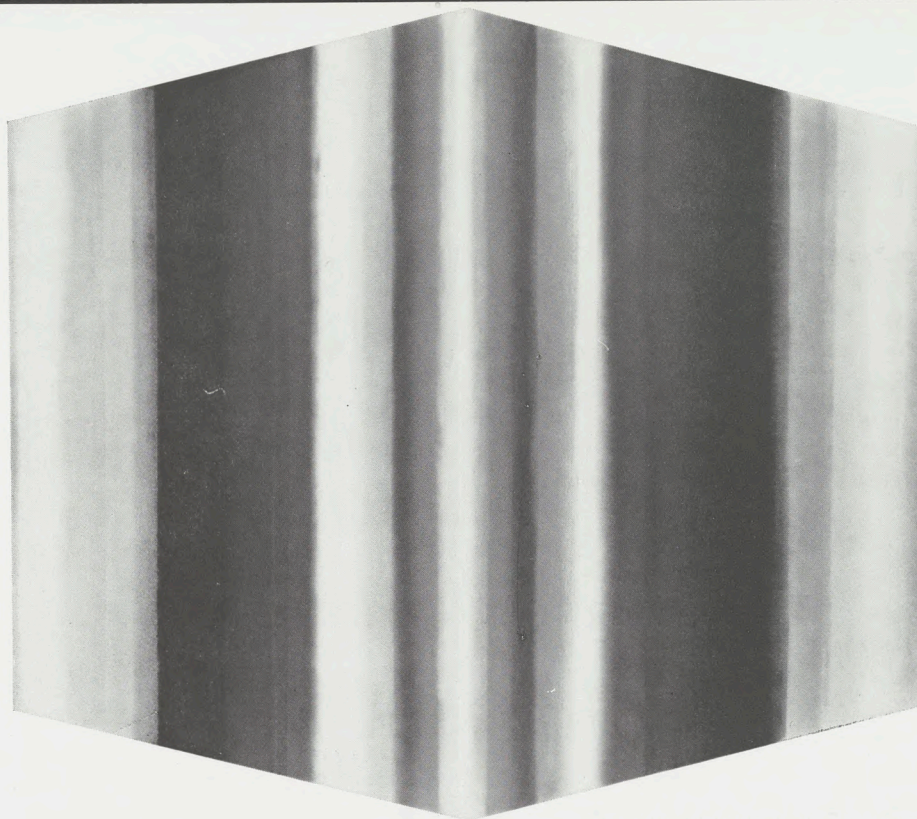
JAMES F. PILGRIM, *Curator*



## CHRONOLOGY

- 1915** Born September 14, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He received his B.A. Degree at The University of Pennsylvania and an M.A. Degree from The George Washington University. He also studied at The Art Students League, The Corcoran School of Art, Mexico City College, Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris and Accademia delle Belle Arti, Florence. He has taught at the Escuela de Bellas Artes, Barcelona, Catholic University of America and American University. Since 1945 he has taught at Western High School in Washington, except for periodic trips to Europe.
- 1939** Married Ida Fox, a poetess.
- 1945** Along with Helmuth Kern, the artist and his wife organized The Washington Workshop Center for The Arts. The Workshop was the focal point in Washington for contemporary artistic expression both as a place of learning and as a community center to promote local interest and participation in the arts. Mr. Berkowitz was the Program Director. In the middle fifties the Workshop was the generative center for what is now recognized as Washington Color Painting. Some of the artists who either taught or were pupils at the Workshop are Jacob Kainen, Jack Perlmutter, Ralph de Burgos, Leo Steppat, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Howard Mehring and Thomas Downing.
- 1955** Feeling the need to concentrate on his own work, the artist and his wife lived on Mallorca for a year.
- 1956** The Workshop was forced to close in April due to financial problems. Berkowitz returned to Washington, but found it difficult to adjust to the city. He took occasional trips to Tucson, Arizona, to paint in the desert.
- 1959** Decided to return to Spain but on the way he and his wife visited Wales where they remained for 2½ years before returning to Washington.
- 1964** Spent 6 months traveling and painting in Mykonos, Greece, and Jerusalem, returning to Washington in the Winter of 1964.
- 1965** Began a new series of color paintings entitled "*Chasubles*."
- 1966** From July to October he abandoned color in a group of white paintings which were then followed by a series of black and white paintings. In October he returned to color and light in the "*Cathedral*" series.
- 1968** Started three series: January, "*Coronas*"; March, "*Obliques*"; May, "*Verticals*."





I. CHASUBLE NO. 5, 1967

## FROM THE WRITINGS OF LEON BERKOWITZ

During the 50's I left the U.S. to work in nature. I wanted to surrender my action to the forces of nature that underlay the facts. I wanted to find authority outside myself—to paint not only out of myself but out of what was beyond my own body. . . . Action painting seemed too constrained.

I returned to the U.S. in 1963. . . . I let my color go. The vitality of the city shattered senses turned to the sea and sky.

I had to find new methods of using paint to float as well as to soar; to expand, contract in the color; to find myself in the paint again so I could be comfortable in the city.

I surrendered the gesture to the color, working it first in verticals and horizontals, then adding diagonals. I thought of crystals, of the form of light. I became fascinated with resulting illusions of form . . .

There was a brief period in which all the colors became fused into white . . .





7. CATHEDRAL NO. 18a, 1968



In the *CATHEDRALS* I have returned to the substance of color again, its glow, its tangibility, its temperature. I am in the world of sensation again and out of it everything else can come: feeling, time, space.

Out of all the gestures I have essentialized the vertical. I try to explore it in all its possibilities, the vertical as a cause and result of the color, the shape of the canvas a cause and result of its ascent and inner verticality . . .

The horizontal remains in the movement of the color. It elicits in this, and in the whole internal ordering of the canvas, reciprocal movement in the viewer; the unity of the painting, its "wholistic" quality resulting from a wholeness in existence in which division is an illusion, a dialogue of the tensions . . .

What I am concerned with now is a quality I think of as "sheets" of color. . . . This quality of flow over flow has been in the work for some time. It probably started in Wales, from paintings in which I folded the two sides of the painting across each other like the wings of a bird, or the crossing of currents—now I am able to give this a formal structure increasingly, a color structure. In *Cathedral No. 13* the yellows express themselves to the edges both from the center and from the two blue mid-centers—a major movement and two counter-movements occurring alternately and together . . .

*Cathedral No. 14*

. . . the moment of becoming when the energy within the orange releases into the purples and travels through to the further orange—to echo back and renew itself. The cools of the inner cores are painted over orange and are felt behind them. This is the inner life of the painting—a coherent being and becoming.

*Cathedral No. 19*

I want color that blazes and remains serene . . . intensely tangible in the moment but echoing measureless time . . .

It is in the *Coronas* that I come closest to color as light. The vertical flash of the after-images, operating in front of the painting brings the painting even closer to the eye. This principle operates to some degree with all paintings. It is probably what suggests the efflorescence. In the blue of daylight this quality is increased by the light of the sky mixing with the cool colors and intensifying the minimal cools within and behind the warms. The paintings then seem to hang in space.

The vertical spines position the maximum cold-hot intensities within areas of varying light and dark saturation. The relaxed verticals affirm by contrast the assertive verticals (perhaps even adding to the optical effect, synaesthetically). Since gesture and optics are here reciprocal, the painting is more apprehensible as a single image held in the senses. It is by such body-response qualities that nature evokes the spiritual in us, evokes an inner realization of the continuum between the material constituents of both nature and ourselves . . .



In *Corona No. 8* I wanted the space to hang on the wall. To breathe in a certain way. I wanted a shimmering, shifting, open space to exist—I wanted the colors to make the space.

I concentrate more and more on the vertical and conditions of light in my work. I am finding new ways to create verticality, perhaps a new sense of the horizontal, the pulse of one against the rise of the other, shot with vibrations, seams of light created by the magic of the after-image . . .

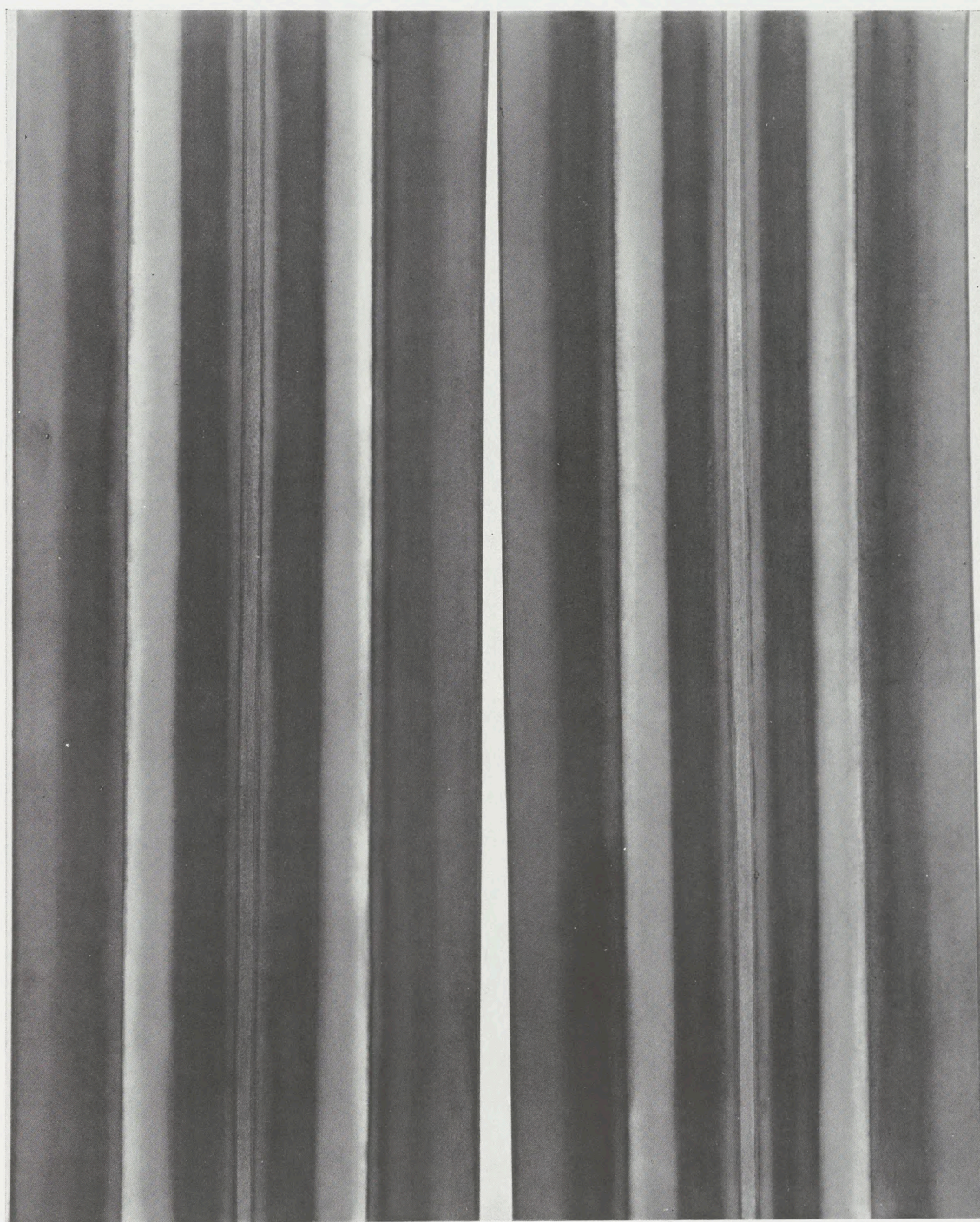
Since Monet and more precisely in the last few years the science of optics has entered the studio. It has informed us with a vocabulary, but not always a language. Light and color have always been primary concerns to the artist. We have always known that life was dependent upon light. Vision is bound closely to our emotions. But more vividly it has been demonstrated that light entering through our pupils acts on the pineal gland, the queen bee of our whole glandular system. Light is life itself . . .

Perhaps what I would like to do is fill the gap between what the Expressionists were trying to do and minimalists are endeavoring to do. The Impressionists isolated light—but the Expressionists failed to use it—returning to material. They offered us instead personal gesture. Pollock by an intuitive leap fused his own energy with the material. Morris Louis spread the material as a stain further transforming it by allowing light to penetrate it. He returned material to a state of energy. . . . By hardening the edge of color we limit its inherent nature and its expressiveness. The way light behaves may be illusionistic but it is the only way we see.

**ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS INCLUDE:** Watkins Gallery of American University, Washington, D. C., 1956; Bishops Palace, St. David, Wales, 1962; New Art Center, London, 1963; Gallery Artes, Mykonos, Greece, 1964; Rina Gallery, Jerusalem, 1964; Mickelson Gallery, Washington, D. C., 1965; Esther Stuttmann Gallery, Washington, D. C., 1966.

**GROUP EXHIBITIONS INCLUDE:** Watkins Gallery of American University, Washington, D. C., 1953; The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1956; Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., 1957; The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C., 1958, 1960, 1963, 1967.





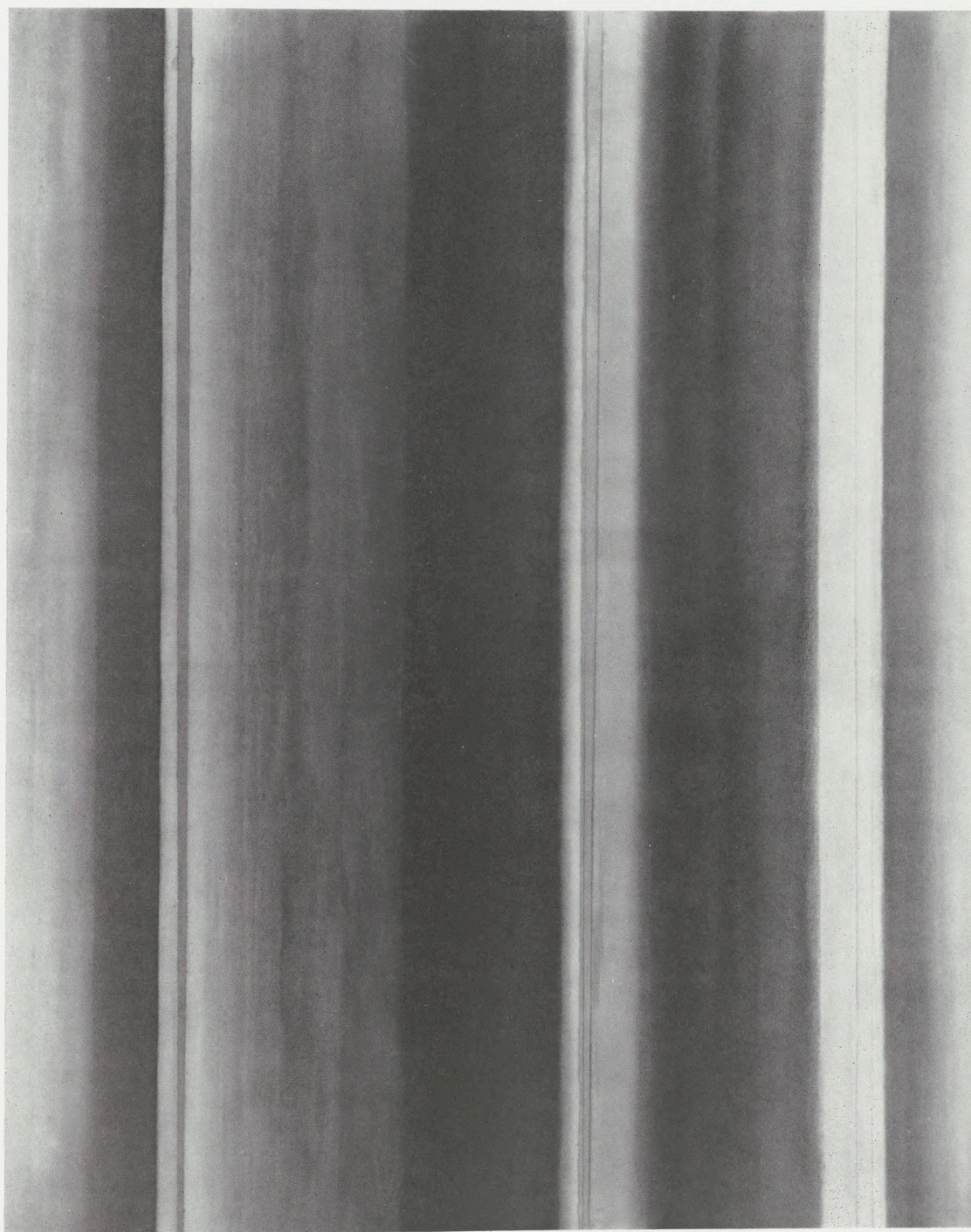
11. CATHEDRAL NO. 22, 1969





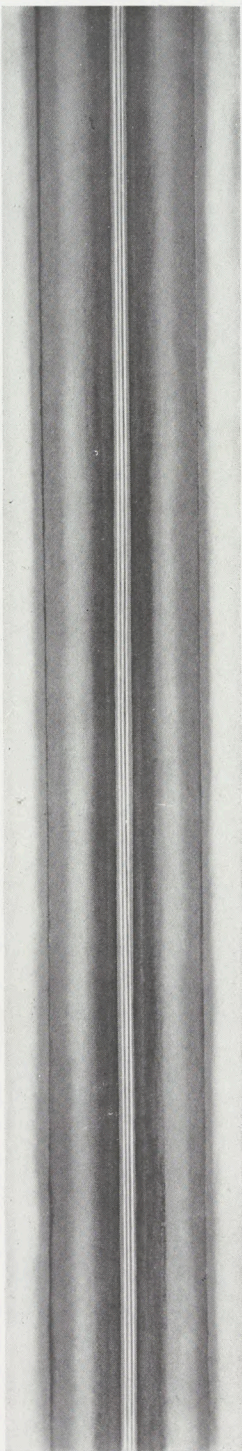
19. CORONA NO. 11, 1968





18. CORONA NO. 10, 1968





31. VERTICAL NO. 6, 1968

## Catalogue

Height precedes width in all dimensions which are in inches. An asterisk preceding the catalogue number indicates the painting is reproduced. Unless otherwise noted, all paintings are lent by the artist.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| *1. CHASUBLE NO. 5, 1967<br>70 x 80<br>oil on canvas<br><i>The Phoenix Museum of Art</i> | 8. CATHEDRAL NO. 19, 1968<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas  |
| 2. DOUBLE CHASUBLE, 1967<br>70 x 160<br>oil on canvas                                    | 9. CATHEDRAL NO. 20, 1968<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas  |
| 3. CATHEDRAL NO. 11, 1968<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas                                    | *10. CATHEDRAL NO. 21, 1968<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas<br><i>Cover illustration<br/>The Corcoran Gallery of Art</i> |
| 4. CATHEDRAL NO. 13, 1968<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas                                    | *11. CATHEDRAL NO. 22, 1969<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas  |
| 5. CATHEDRAL NO. 16, 1968<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas                                    | 12. CATHEDRAL NO. 23, 1969<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas   |
| 6. CATHEDRAL NO. 17, 1968<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas                                    | 13. CORONA NO. 5, 1968<br>70 x 34<br>oil on canvas   |
| *7. CATHEDRAL NO. 18a, 1968<br>90 x 72<br>oil on canvas                                  | 14. CORONA NO. 6, 1968<br>72 x 40½<br>oil on canvas  |



32. VERTICAL NO. 7, 1969

\*15. CORONA NO. 7, 1968  
90 x 40½  
oil on canvas

16. CORONA NO. 8, 1968  
90 x 40½  
oil on canvas

17. CORONA NO. 9, 1968  
90 x 40½  
oil on canvas

\*18. CORONA NO. 10, 1968  
90 x 72  
oil on canvas

\*19. CORONA NO. 11, 1968  
90 x 50  
oil on canvas

20. CORONA NO. 12, 1969  
90 x 48  
oil on canvas

21. OBLIQUE NO. 4, 1968  
126 x 37  
oil on canvas

22. OBLIQUE NO. 5, 1968  
126 x 37  
oil on canvas

23. OBLIQUE NO. 6, 1968  
126 x 37  
oil on canvas

24. OBLIQUE NO. 7, 1968  
126 x 37  
oil on canvas

\*25. OBLIQUE NO. 8, 1968  
126 x 37  
oil on canvas

\*26. OBLIQUE NO. 9, 1969  
126 x 37  
oil on canvas

27. VERTICAL NO. 2, 1968  
126 x 19  
oil on canvas

28. VERTICAL NO. 3, 1968  
126 x 19  
oil on canvas

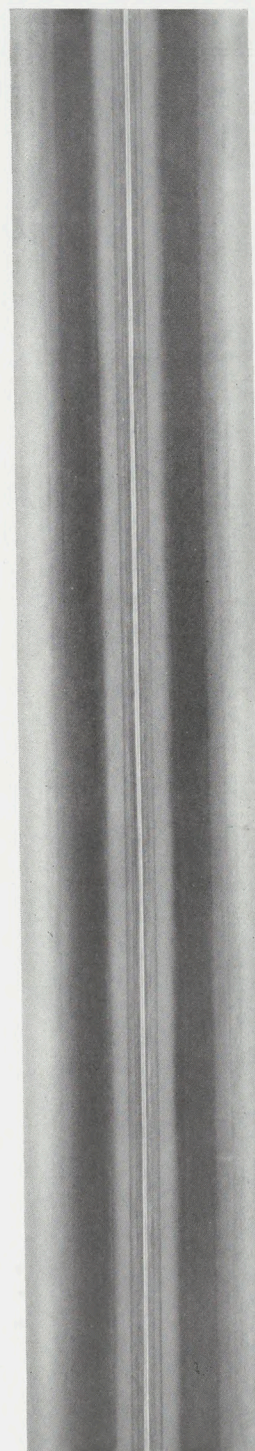
29. VERTICAL NO. 4, 1968  
126 x 19  
oil on canvas

30. VERTICAL NO. 5, 1968  
126 x 19  
oil on canvas

\*31. VERTICAL NO. 6, 1968  
126 x 19  
oil on canvas

\*32. VERTICAL NO. 7, 1969  
126 x 19  
oil on canvas

33. VERTICAL NO. 8, 1969  
126 x 19  
oil on canvas





**Exhibition Dates:**

February 22 - March 23, 1969

Photographs by Victor Amato

Designed by Kurt Wiener

Printed by H. K. Press, Washington, D. C.

**THE CORCORAN GALLERY OF ART**